MINI CLASSICS

THE LITTLE MERMAID

ILLUSTRATED BY ROGER LANGTON

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A Parragon Book

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MINI CLASSICS

THE LITTLE MERMAID

RETOLD BY STEPHANIE LASLETT
ILLUSTRATED BY ROGER LANGTON

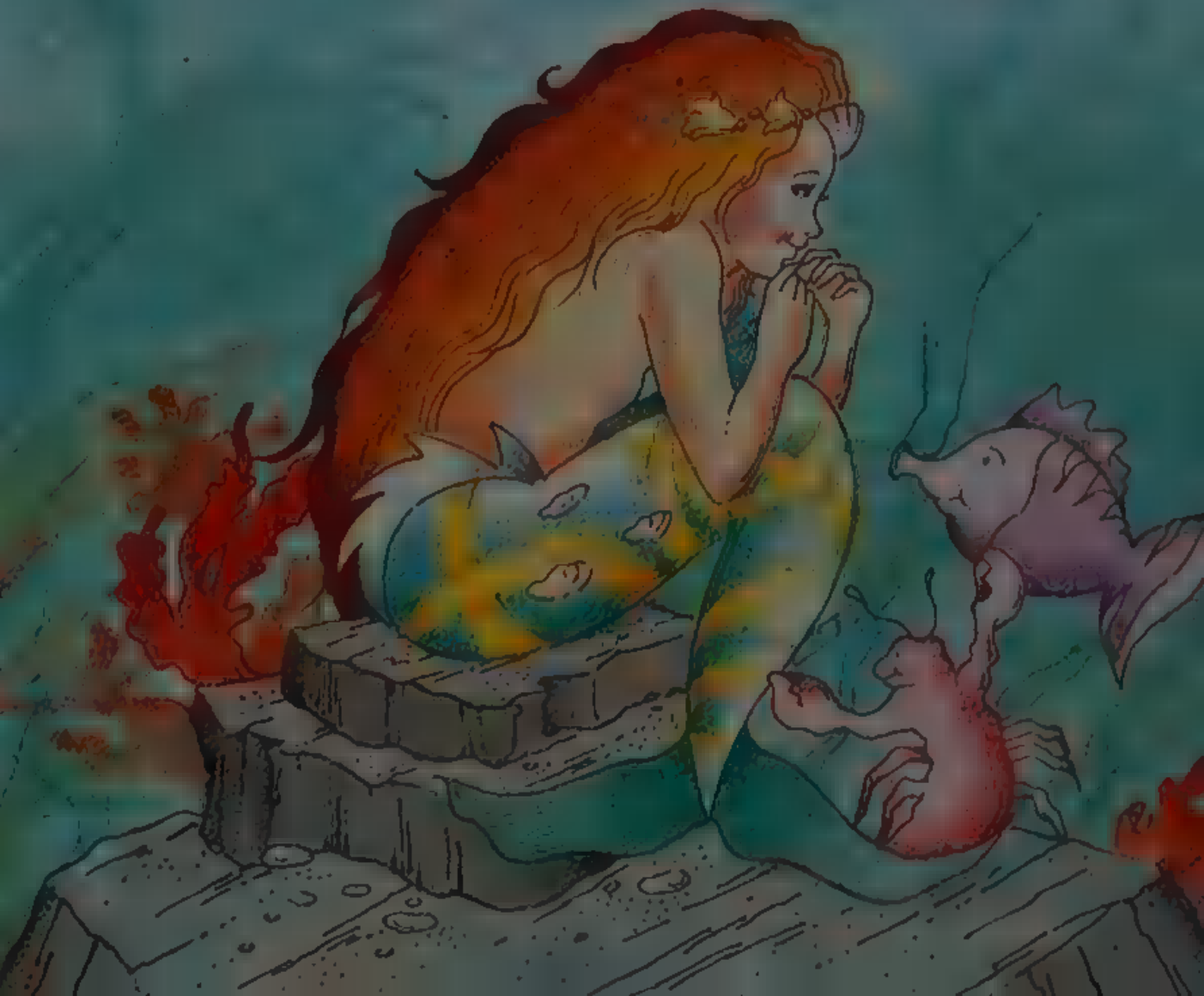
PARRAGON

Far out to sea the water is as blue as a cornflower and as clear as the purest crystal, but it is deep. So deep that very, very many church towers could be stacked from the sea-bed, one on top of the other before they would reach the surface high above. Here dwelt the Mer People in their wonderful underwater world and just where the water was deepest stood the palace of the Mer King. It was a magnificent sight with coral walls and

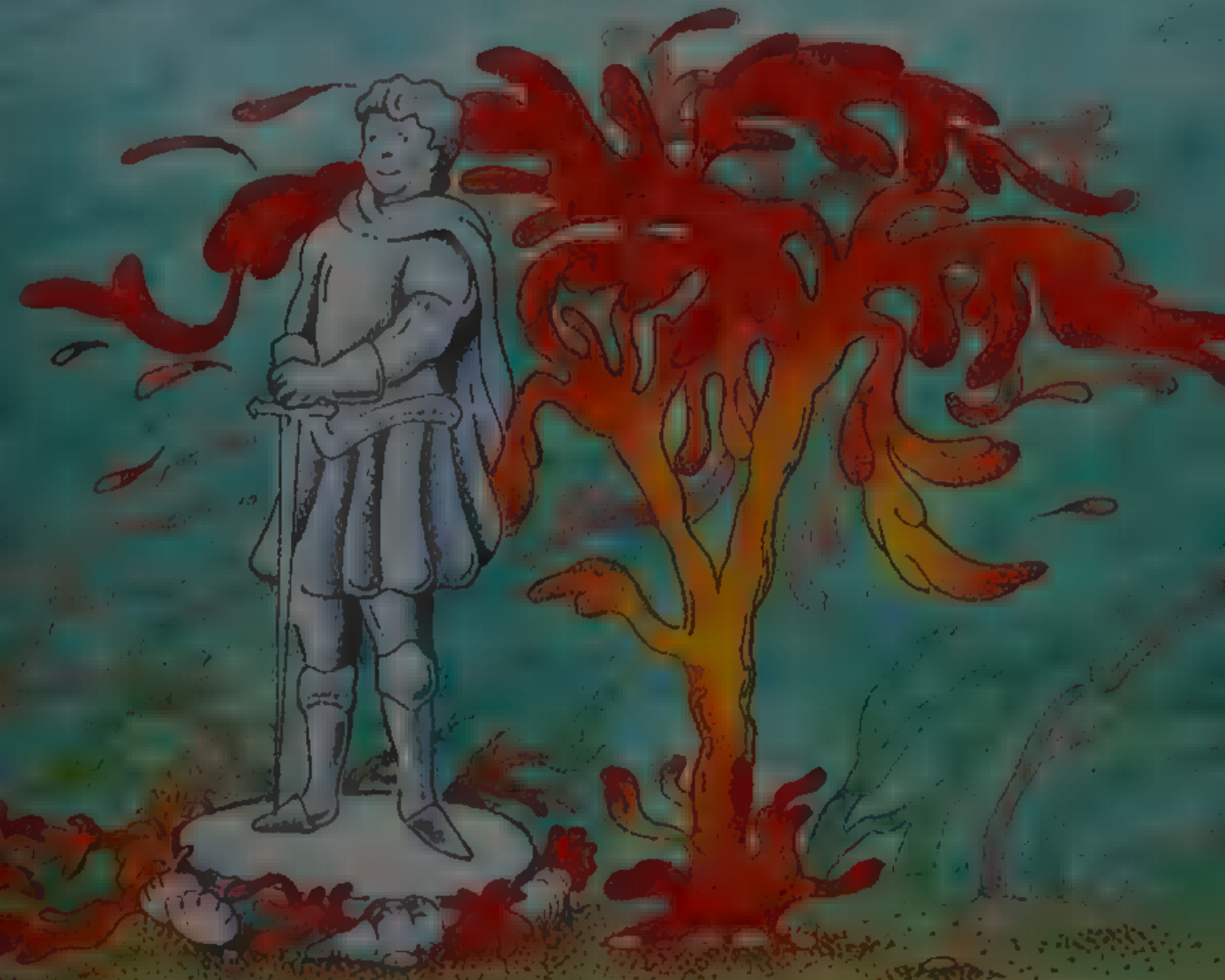
amber windows. The roof was made of mussel shells which constantly opened and closed as the sea-water billowed over them.

The Mer King's wife had died some years before so he lived in the palace with his mother and six young daughters. The Princesses were all very beautiful but the youngest was the most beautiful of all. She was a quiet, thoughtful little girl and spent most of her time alone in her garden. Here she planted her

favourite seaweeds in a rainbow of colours. Under the tree was her prize possession, a white marble statue of a boy which she had rescued from a shipwreck.



The fronds of seaweed gently stroked the cold marble body, and the little Princess often sat beside him and wondered who he might be.



She spent long hours thinking about the upper world and gave her grandmother no peace until the old woman had recounted everything she knew about the human beings who lived in the land above the sea.

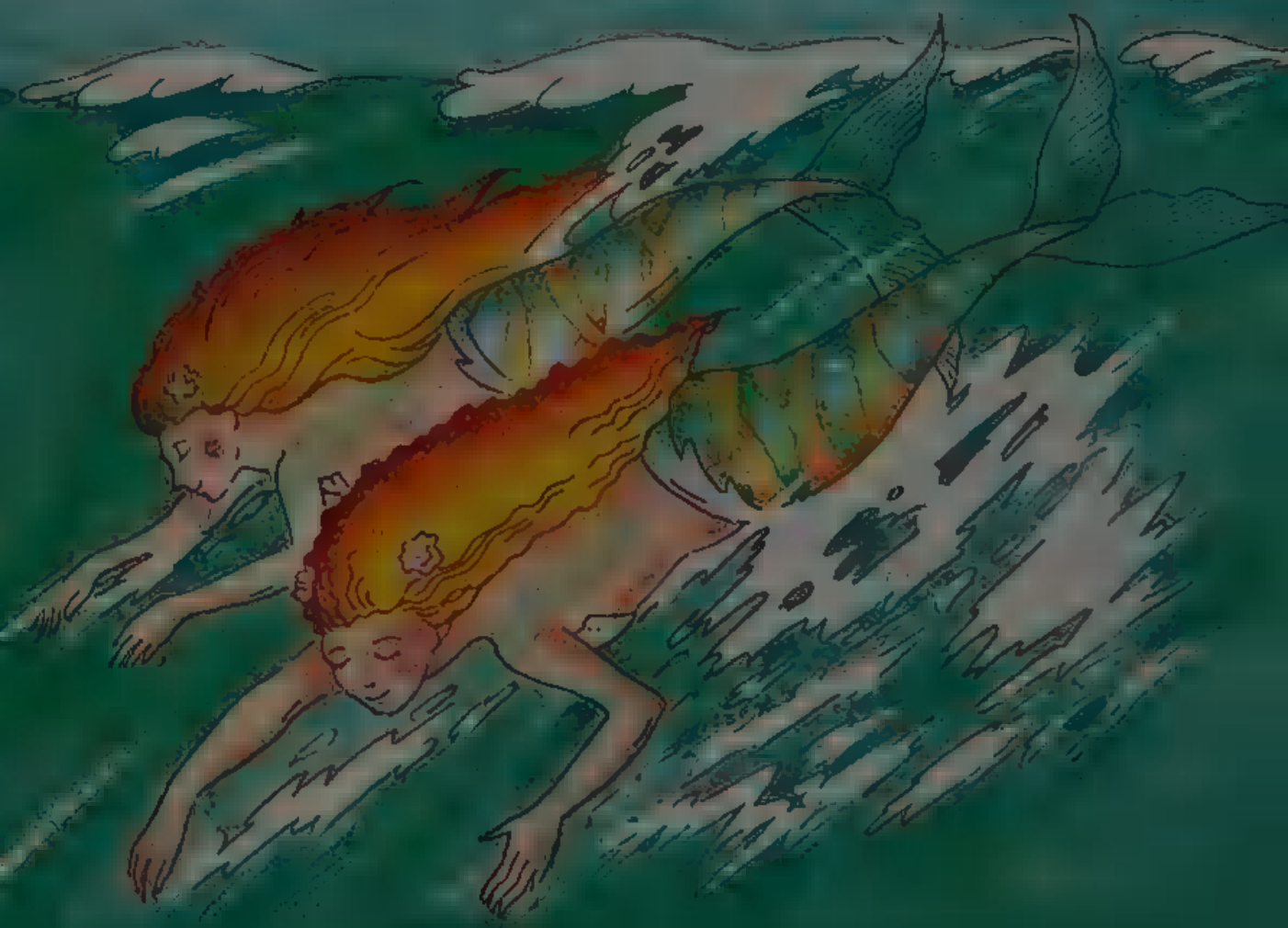
"On your fifteenth birthday," said her grandmother, "you will be allowed to rise to the surface. There you can sit on the rocks in the moonlight and watch the ships sail by."

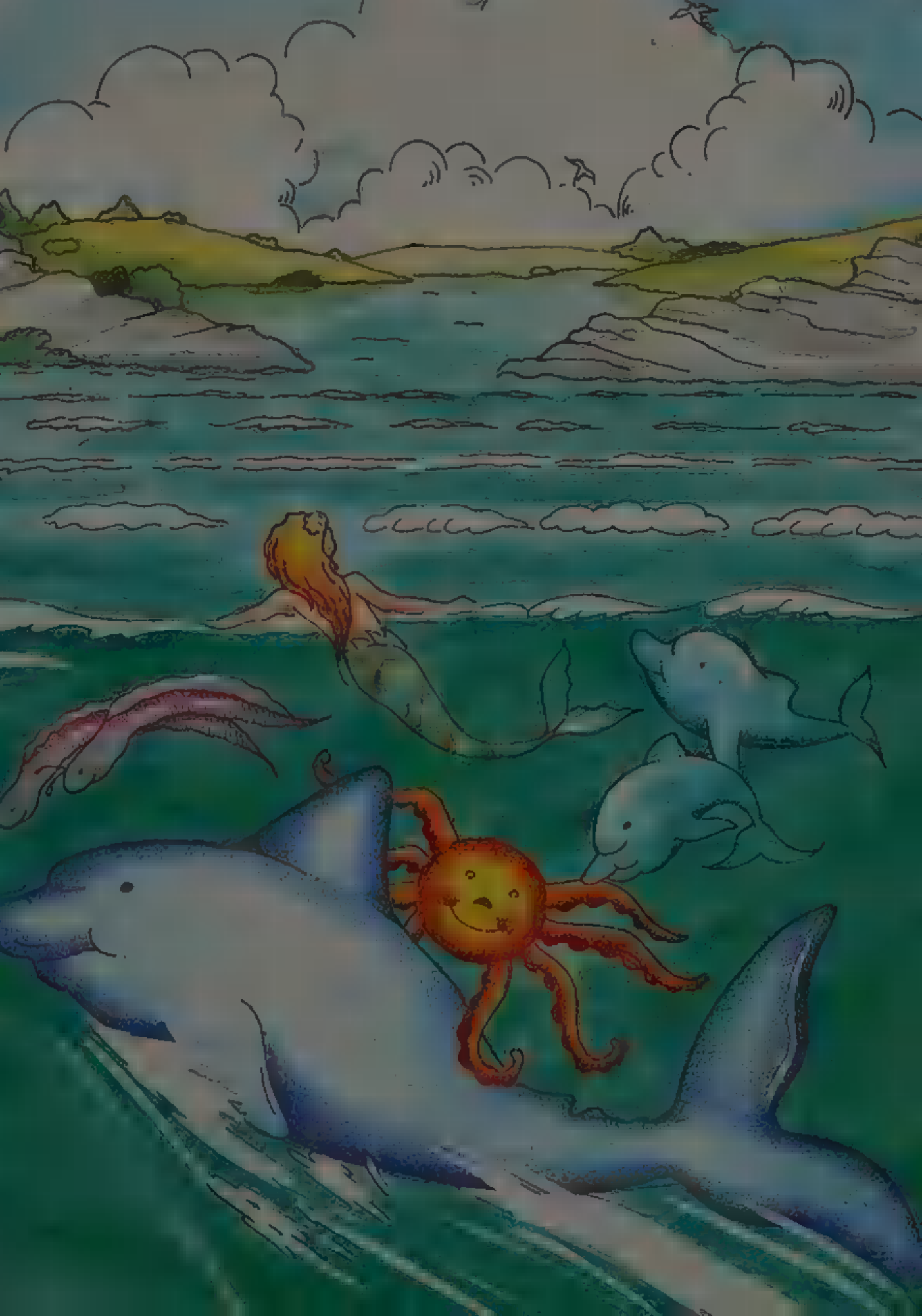
The little girl longed for the years to pass quickly but, alas!

she was the youngest daughter and had to wait six whole years before it was her turn to see the world of men. As each of her sisters came of age and rose to the surface, the little Mermaid would wait eagerly for their news.

Their stories were filled with the sound of ringing church bells, distant music and laughter and far-away bird-song. They saw magical sunsets, dancing dolphins and children playing happily on the shore.

Each sister was quite enchanted by so many new delights, but the novelty was soon over and they were happy to return to their home deep at the bottom of the sea.





The youngest Princess was impatient for her time to come.

"If only I was fifteen!" she sighed. "How I wish I could see the upper world!" The years slowly passed and at last her birthday arrived.

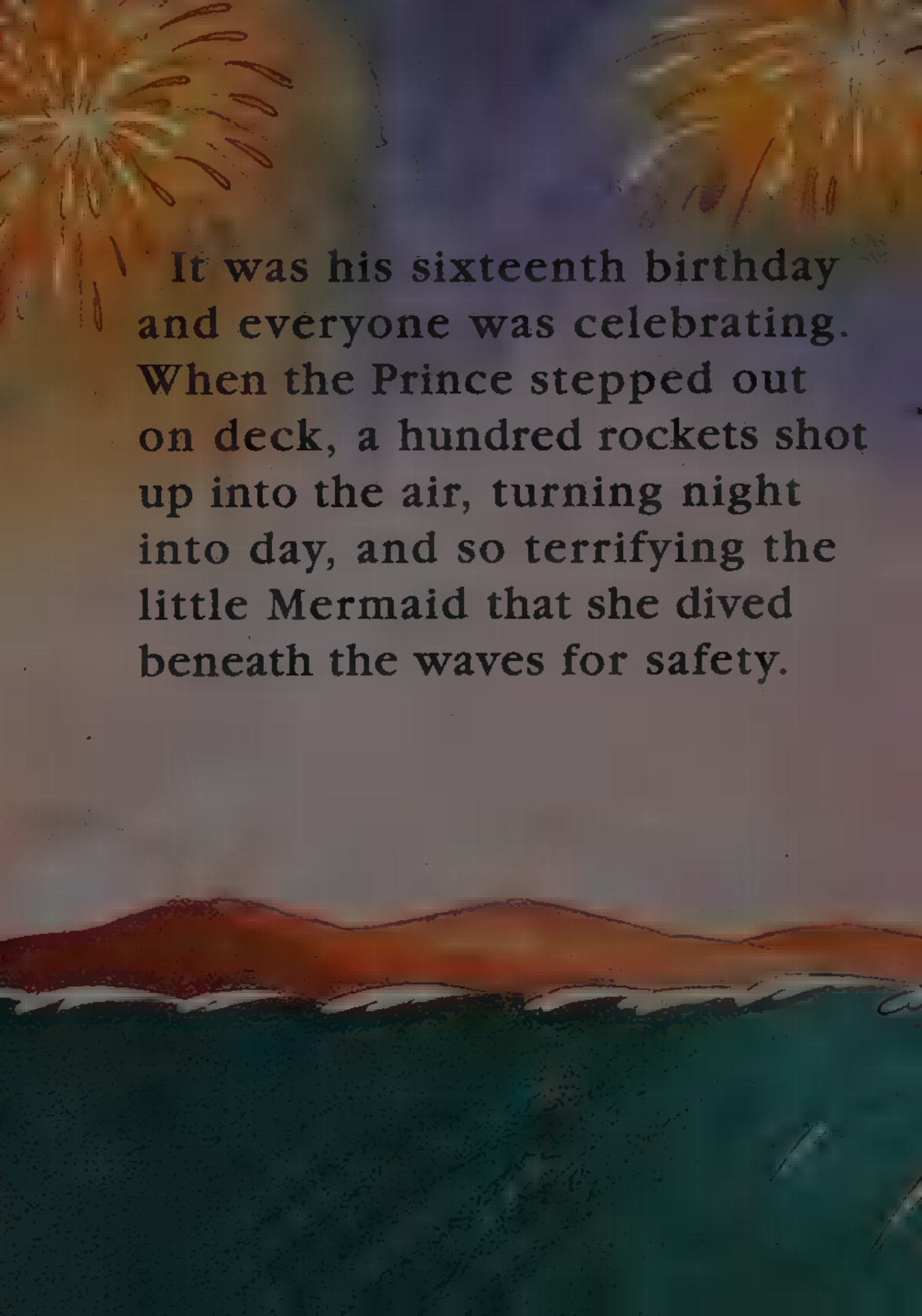
"Well, now it is your turn," said her grandmother. "Come, let me dress you," and around the Princess's hair she wound a wreath of white lilies, sprinkled with pearls. The little Mermaid fidgeted and begged her to hurry and at long last

she was ready to leave.

"Farewell!" she cried as she rose through the sea like a silver bubble.

When she reached the surface, the sun had just slipped below the horizon and the clouds gleamed pink and gold. The evening star shone in the pale western sky, not a breath of air stirred and the sea was as smooth as a mirror. It was the most beautiful sight she had ever seen. Then, to her delight, she spied a large ship close by.

As the sky above grew dark, hundreds of lamps burst into light, and music and song rang out from the decks. The little Mermaid peeped inside the cabins. There she saw many richly-dressed men but the handsomest of all was a young Prince with large black eyes.



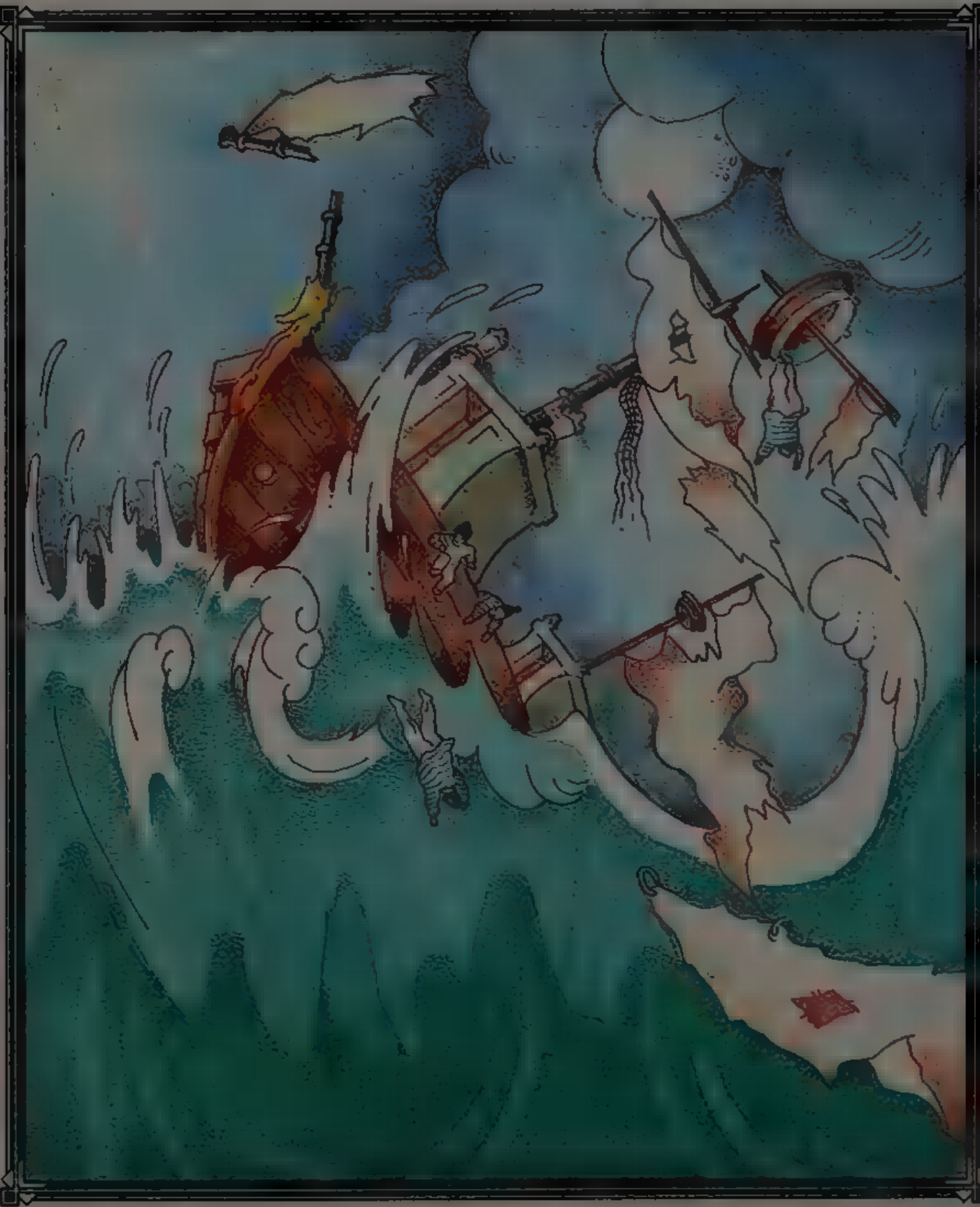
It was his sixteenth birthday and everyone was celebrating. When the Prince stepped out on deck, a hundred rockets shot up into the air, turning night into day, and so terrifying the little Mermaid that she dived beneath the waves for safety.

But soon curiosity got the better of her and up she came again for another look.

The sight that met her startled eyes nearly took her breath away for it seemed as if all the stars of heaven were raining down upon her. Fiery sparks raced across the velvet sky as bright star-bursts exploded high above. All was mirrored in the glassy surface of the water until the light was so great, it seemed like day! The little Mermaid stared and stared.

It was getting late but she could not bear to leave the ship and the handsome young Prince. Time passed but still she lingered, rocked to and fro by the gentle waves. Suddenly thick black clouds gathered overhead and distant thunder could be heard. The waves rose high and the great ship was tossed on the ocean as if it were a flimsy rowing boat.

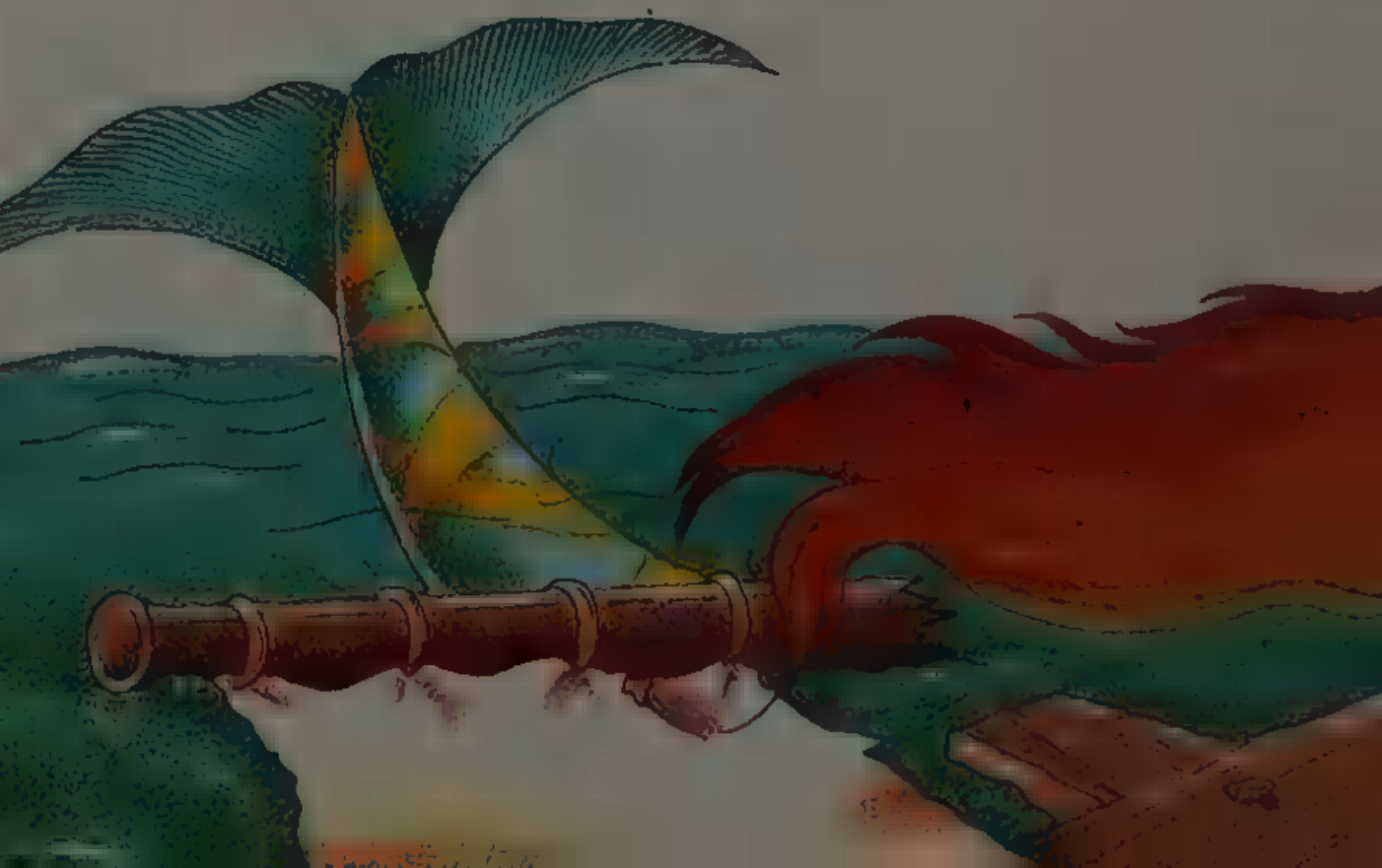
"Hurry! Hurry!" the sailors cried as they rushed about the deck. "A storm is on its way!"



The little Mermaid had never seen such a sight before and did not understand the danger, but the poor crew was terrified and called to God for mercy. Suddenly the ship shuddered, her side cracked and the sea-water poured in. The main mast snapped like a reed and slowly the ship overturned and slid beneath the waves.

Above the howling wind, the little Mermaid could hear the sailors' screams as they clung to the wreckage in the sea.

"The Prince!" she gasped. "He must not die!" At last she found him clinging to a broken beam. His eyes were closed and he would surely have lost his grip and drowned had the little Mermaid not come to his rescue.



With all her strength she held him above the water until morning. Then, when the storm had died down and the sun rose like fire out of the sea, she saw the distant shore and knew she must get him there.

As he lay motionless on the beam he reminded her of her own dear statue. Tenderly the Mermaid kissed his forehead, stroked the wet hair from his eyes, then she set out for land, pulling the Prince beside her.

When she reached the warm sand she left him and hid behind the rocks at the water's edge. There was a school close by and soon the door opened and several girls ran down the steps and across the sand.

Suddenly they stopped. They had discovered the Prince. The Mermaid watched as one girl knelt down by his side whilst her schoolfriends stayed some way off and called to her to come. Their voices roused the Prince and he slowly opened his eyes to see the face of a young girl bending over him.

With a shriek, she jumped to her feet and they all ran back to the safety of their school. Then the Prince remembered a girl rescuing him from the

sea. That was surely the girl who had saved his life! The little Mermaid's eyes filled with tears. Sorrowfully, she turned away and swam home.

"What did you see and why were you away so long?" her sisters asked anxiously but the youngest Princess just shook her head and sighed. Many times she rose to visit the place where she had left the Prince. She saw the snow melt on the mountains, the fruit ripen on the trees, but she never once saw him.

Sadly she returned to her marble statue where the seaweeds, now untended, grew wild and free and entwined their long stems and tendrils amongst each other until her whole garden became a bower.

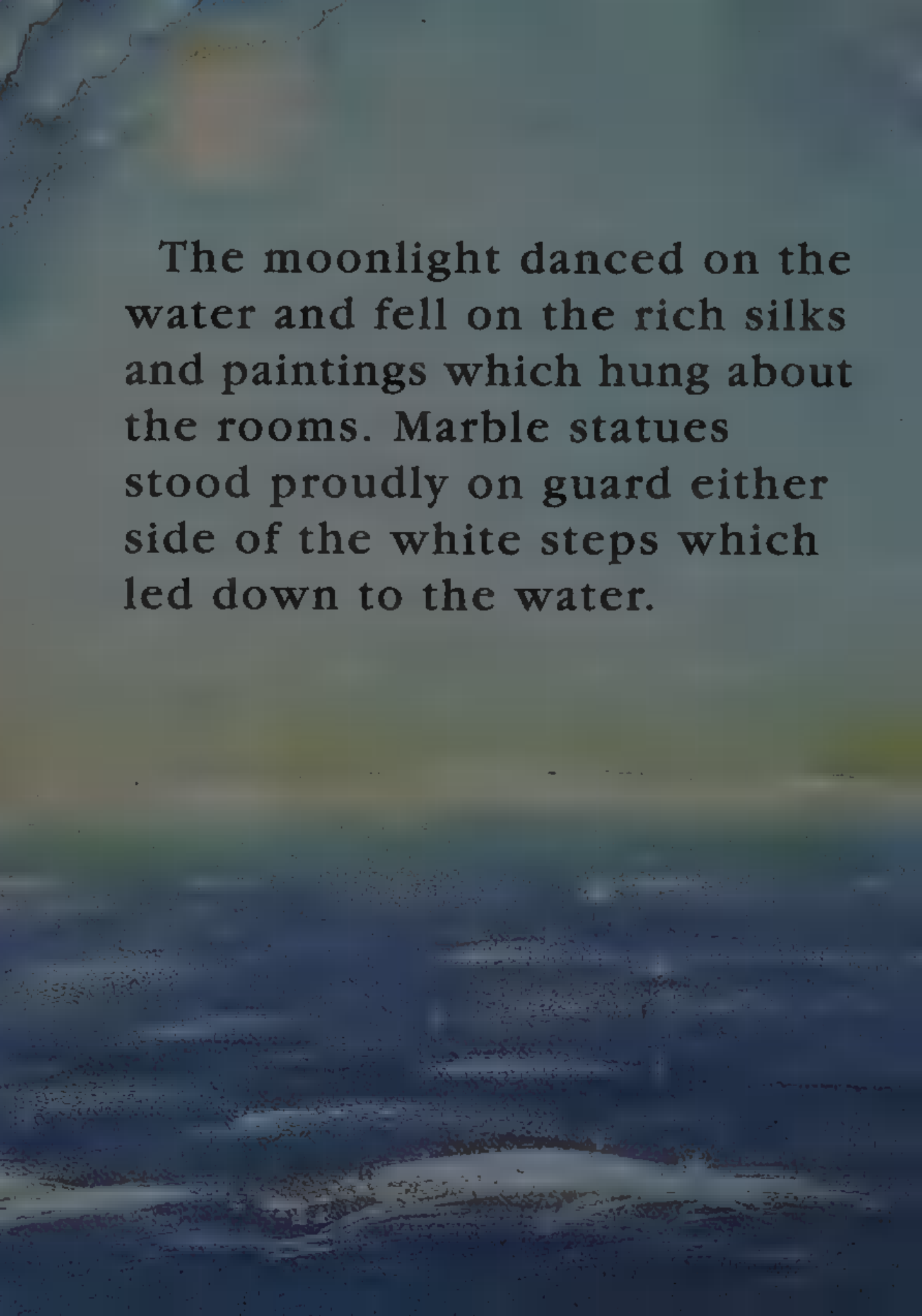
After a time the little Mermaid could bear her unhappiness no longer and with bitter tears recounted her tale to her sisters.

"I only wish I could see him again," she sobbed as she dabbed at her eyes with a soft pink anemone. The Princesses

questioned everyone in the Kingdom and at last a young mermaid spoke out.

"I know of this Prince," she said, "and I know exactly where he lives."

"We have found him!" the Princesses told their young sister and soon, arm in arm, all six of them were bobbing in the sea in front of the Prince's Palace. A gold dome crowned the building and inside they could see a tall fountain sparkling diamond-bright.



The moonlight danced on the water and fell on the rich silks and paintings which hung about the rooms. Marble statues stood proudly on guard either side of the white steps which led down to the water.

After that the little Mermaid returned to the Palace almost every day. She watched the young Prince as he sat all alone on the balcony. She listened to the fishermen as they cast their nets and wished that she could speak to them. Humans could sail over the ocean, climb high mountains and walk through green woodlands and how she wished she could, too. One day she visited her grandmother.

"Do humans live forever or do they die like us?" she asked.

"They die as we die," replied the old woman. "And their life is much shorter than ours. We live to the grand age of three hundred years and when we die we become foam on the sea and can never live again. But human beings have souls which continue to live even after their bodies have died."

The Mermaid thought a while. "I wish I could be human, grandmother," she said. "Is there a way that I can live in the upper world and have a soul

which will live forever?"

Her grandmother smiled and shook her head.

"Only if you found a man who loved you so deeply that you meant more to him than life itself; who loved you enough to share his whole life with you for all eternity. Then your souls would unite and you would know human bliss. But I am afraid that can never be, little grand-daughter."

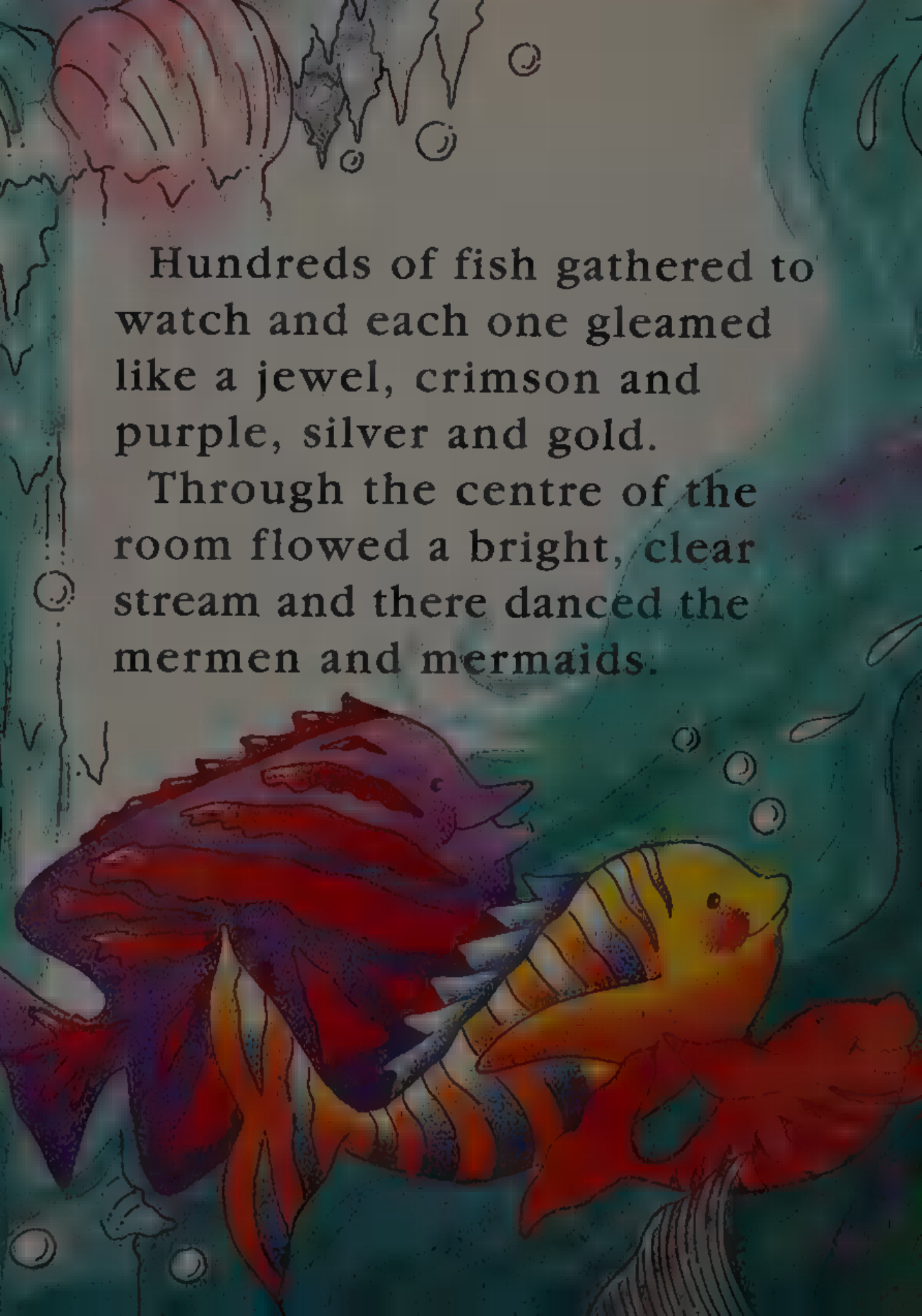
"Why, oh why?" begged the little Mermaid.

Her grandmother patted her head. "Because what we see as our most beautiful gift, our tail, is seen by man as something hideous. To be handsome in the upper world, you must have two clumsy stalks, which they call legs."

Sadly the little Mermaid regarded her silvery scales.

"Be happy!" urged the old woman. "You will have three hundred years of joy to fill and then you can rest peacefully when your life is over."

That night there was a Court Ball in the Undersea Kingdom. The crystal clear walls of the ballroom were decorated with hundreds of green and rose-pink shells. From each one a bright light shone forth, streaming across the splendid room and out through the glassy walls, lighting up the ocean.



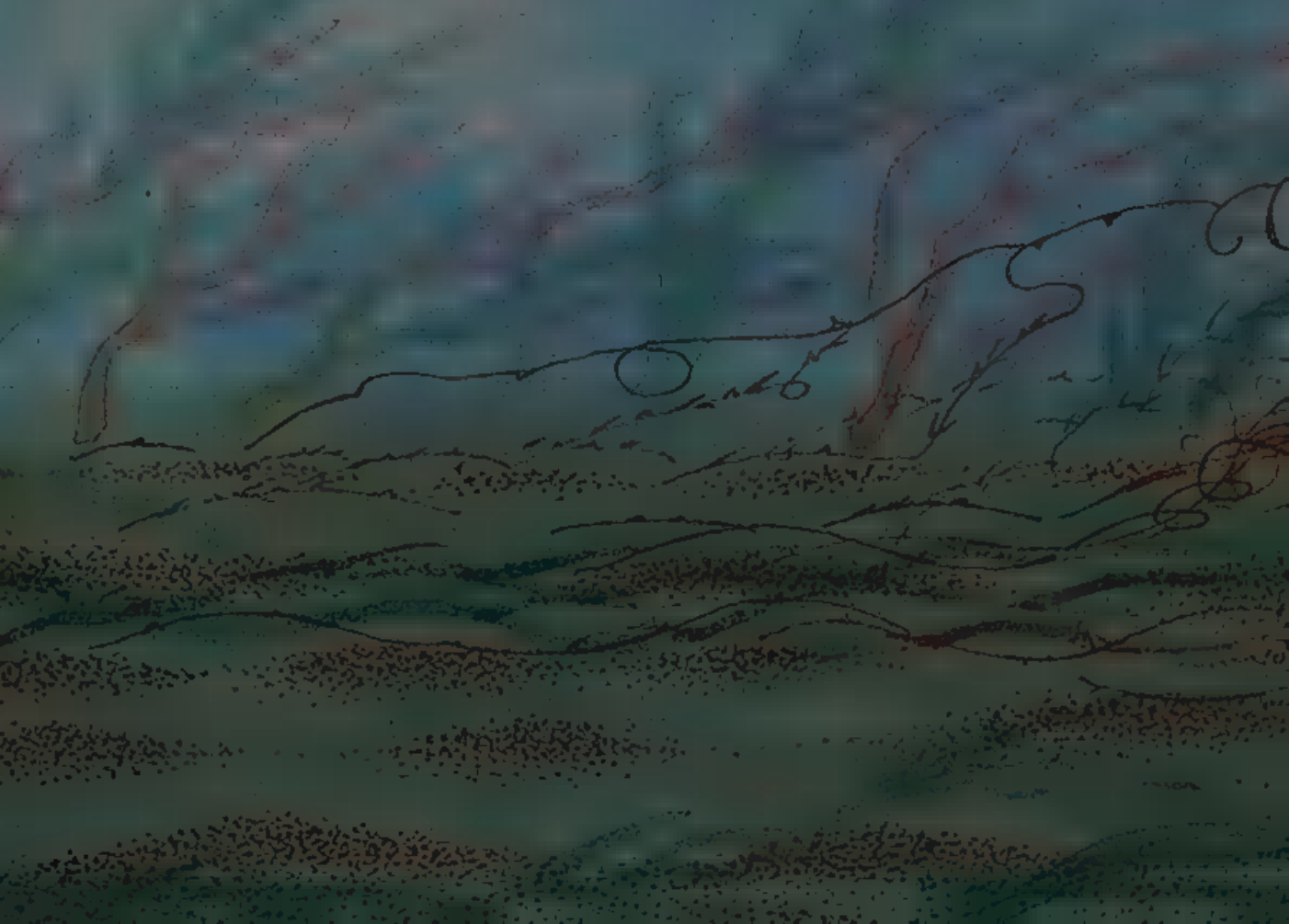
Hundreds of fish gathered to watch and each one gleamed like a jewel, crimson and purple, silver and gold.

Through the centre of the room flowed a bright, clear stream and there danced the mermen and mermaids.

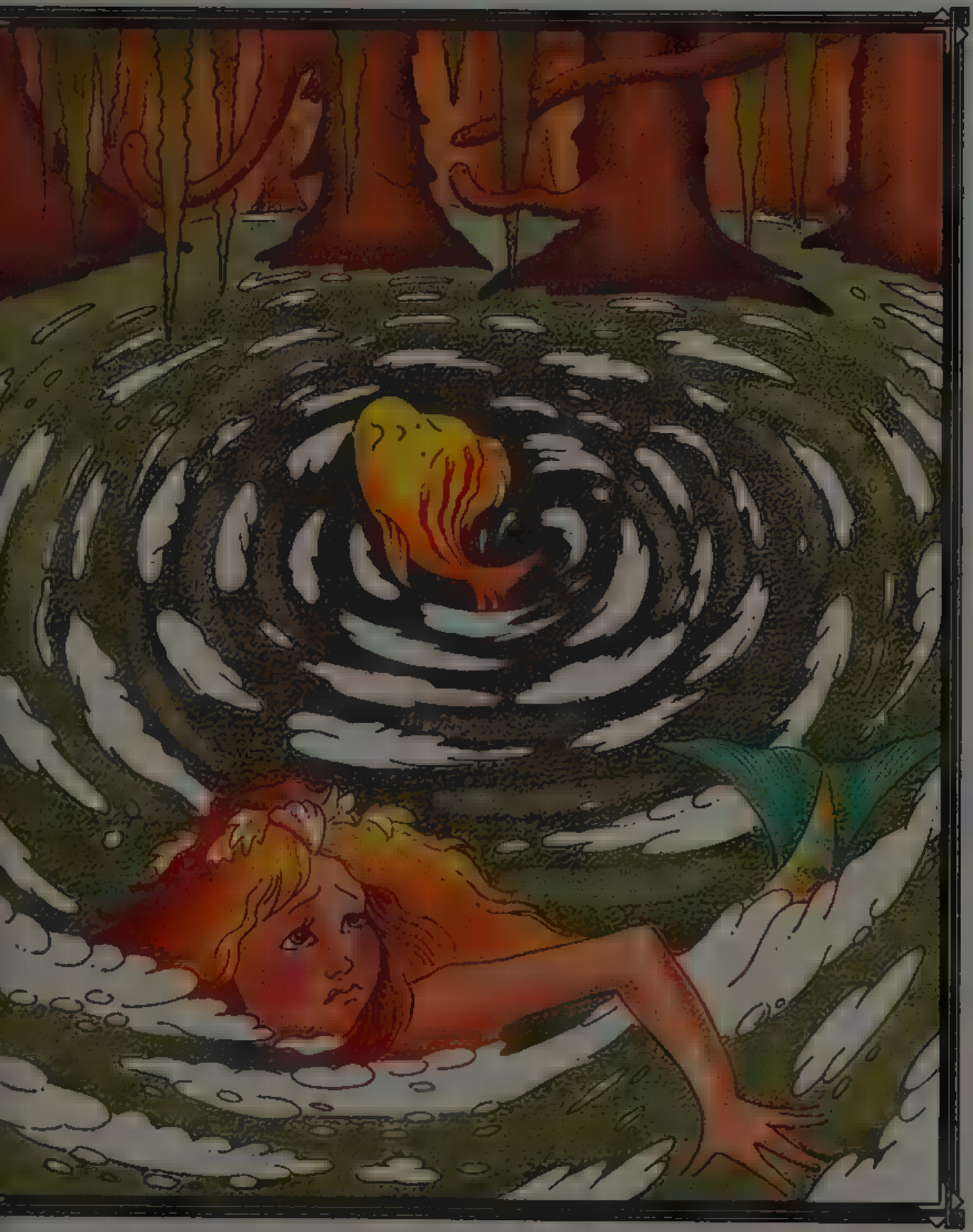
Sweet song filled the air and the little Princess sang most sweetly of all. The Mer People cheered her and for a moment she was happy to be reminded that there was no more lovely voice than hers in all the sea. Then her thoughts returned to the upper world. Sadly, she remembered her grandmother's words: 'Three hundred years of joy.' But the princess felt her life would never be full of joy because she could not forget her handsome Prince.

Quietly she stole away from the merrymaking and sat alone in her neglected garden.

"If only I could join my Prince," she whispered. Suddenly she sat up straight. She had remembered the sea-witch.



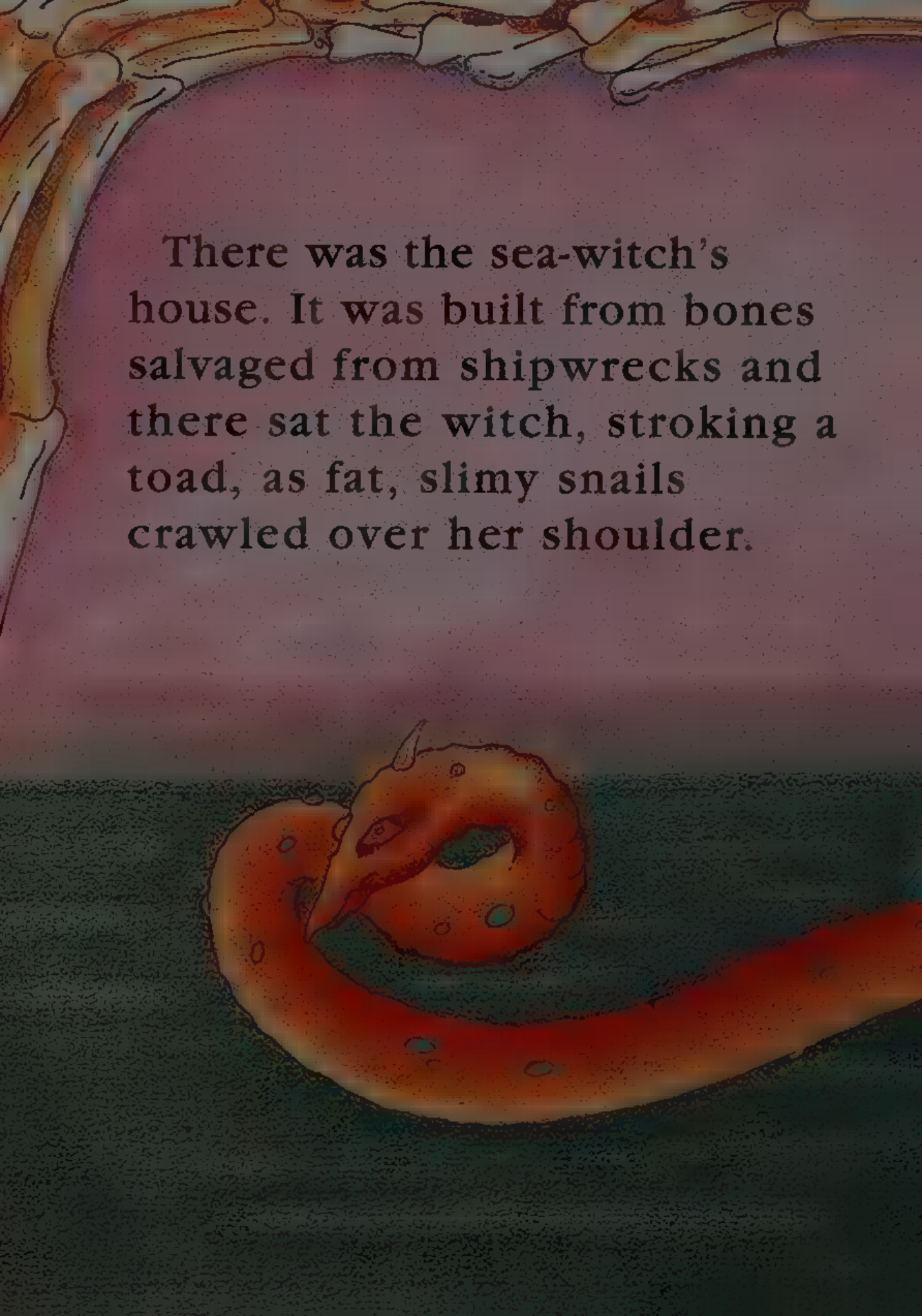
"She frightens me dreadfully but maybe she will know what to do," said the Mermaid to herself, and with a determined toss of her head, she was on her way. No flowers bloomed along this path; nothing but bare, grey sand. Soon she felt the tug of a frothing,foaming whirlpool, where the water whizzed like a mill wheel, dragging all in its path down to the abyss below. Strongly she fought against its steady pull until she was well clear.



Then she found herself in a boiling, slimy bog and beyond, a wood of trees rose from the ground like hundred-headed serpents. With slimy branches and worm-like fingers, whatever they seized was caught fast forever. Drowned sailors' skulls grinned at her from the murky depths and the little Mermaid's heart pounded with fear.

Fastening up her long waving hair, she swam swifter than a gliding fish, and passed safely through the clutching branches.

There was the sea-witch's house. It was built from bones salvaged from shipwrecks and there sat the witch, stroking a toad, as fat, slimy snails crawled over her shoulder.



"I know what you want," she said, narrowing her eyes at the little Princess. "Your wish is foolish and bound to bring you unhappiness but it could be granted. You wish to get rid of your tail and grow two stilts to walk upon so that a young Prince may fall in love with you and your soul can live forever — is that not so?"

The witch cackled so wildly that her pet toad and snails fell from her lap. "I will mix you a potion and when you

swallow it your tail will shrink away to form those things which men call legs. It will be very painful and every step will feel as though you walk on sharp knives. Can you endure all this suffering?"

"Yes, I will do it," answered the Princess in a trembling voice, as she thought of her dear Prince and their life together.

"But remember," said the sea-witch. "Never again will you be a mermaid and you may never return to your home."

The sea-witch leaned closer and hissed in the mermaid's shell-like ear.

"Unless you win the Prince's love and become the centre of all his thoughts and wishes, you will never gain the soul you seek and live forever. If he should marry another, then the morning after his wedding day, your heart will break with sorrow, and you will die and become foam on the sea."

"Still I am willing," said the little Mermaid, pale as death.

"Then you must pay me for my trouble," hissed the witch. "And it is no small thing that I ask. You have the sweetest voice in all the sea — you must give it to me!"

"But if you take my voice," said the Princess, "what shall I use to charm the Prince?"

"Your grace and beauty," replied the witch, "and your eloquent eyes. With gifts like these it will be easy to win his heart."

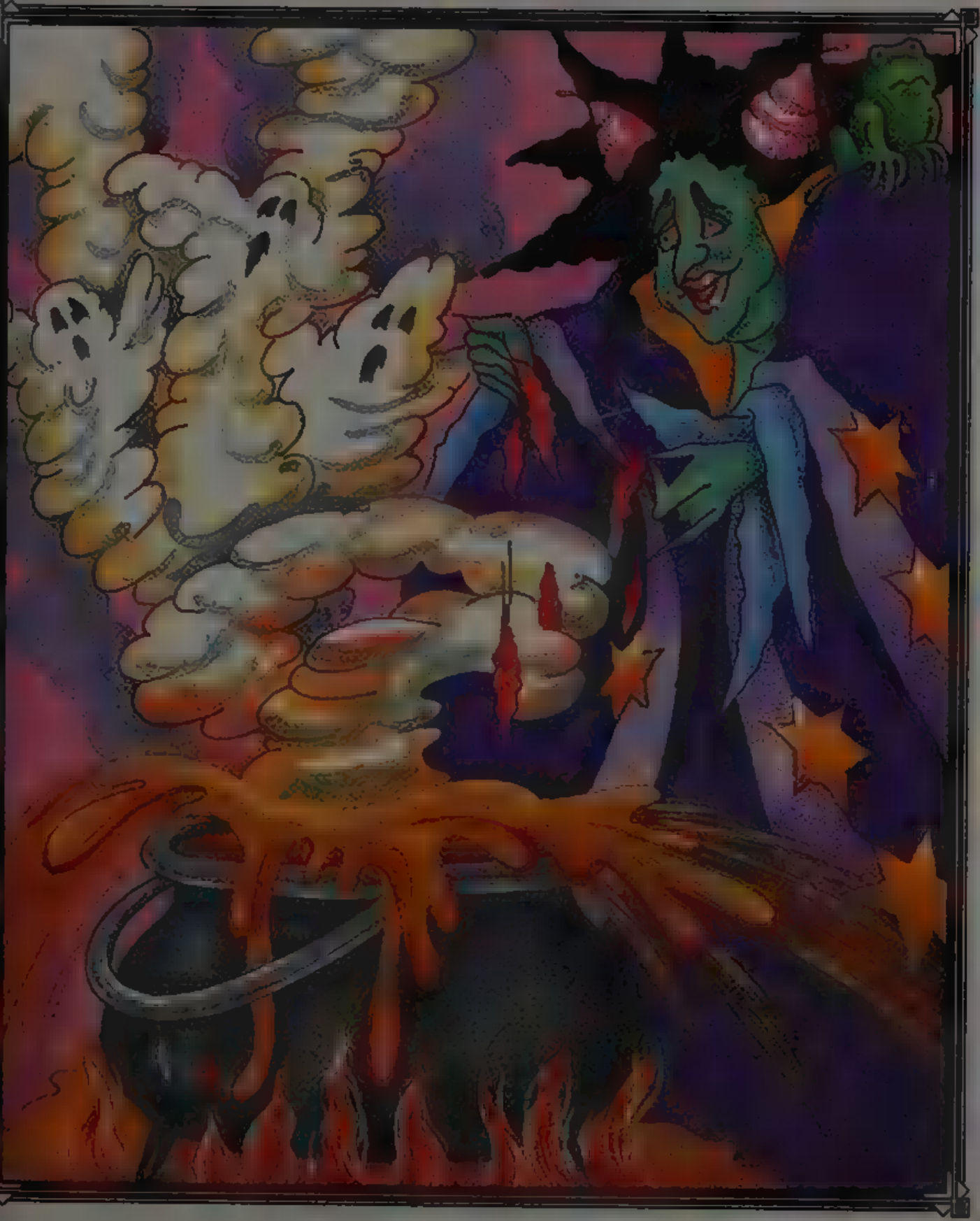
"Let it be so," whispered the Princess and so the witch began.

The old sea-witch scooped up a handful of snails.

"Cleanliness is important," she remarked cheerfully as she scrubbed the inside of her big black cauldron with the poor little creatures.

Then the sea-witch scratched her bosom and let the black blood trickle down into her cauldron. She added bladder-wrack, spume and other strange ingredients until smoke rose from the mixture and formed horrible shapes above the pot. At last the magic drink was ready.

"Here it is!" cried the Witch, handing her a bottle and before the Mermaid had time to think, the old crone leant over and cut her tongue from her head.



Now the poor little Princess could neither sing nor speak. Slowly she swam home and this time the evil trees shrank back as she passed, clutching the glittering bottle in her hand.

Soon she was back at the Palace. It was very late and all was dark and still. Without her tongue the Mermaid could not bid her family farewell and her heart felt ready to break.

Waving goodbye again and again, she rose through the dark blue waters to the world above

and left her home forever.

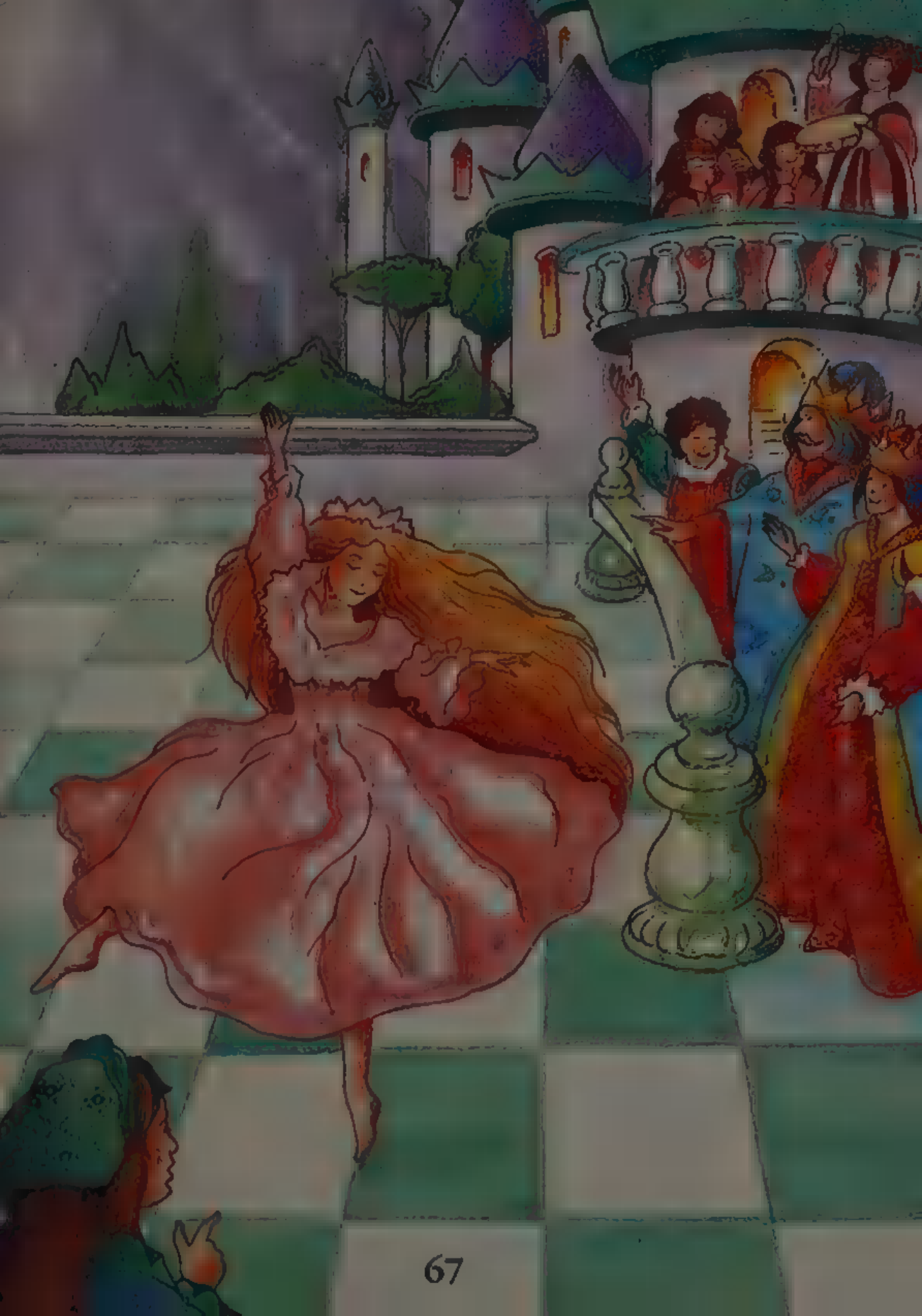
The sun had not yet risen when she arrived at the Prince's Palace. Wearily she pulled herself up onto the marble steps and, with one swallow, she drank the strange potion. It ran through her body like a sharp knife and, with a cry, the Mermaid fell down in a dead faint. When she awoke she saw beside her the handsome young Prince with the coal-black eyes.

"Who are you?" he asked.

But the poor Mermaid could only smile in reply, for, alas! she could not speak. Gently the Prince offered her his hand and led her into the Palace. Then the sea-witch's prediction came true for every footstep felt like a knife-cut, but the Princess bore the pain bravely.

All who saw her marvelled at her beauty for she was lovelier than any girl ever seen before. The royal maids dressed her in clothes of muslin and soft silk and bade her rest a while.

Sweet music drifted into the room and the little Princess arose. Down the stairs she went and, stretching out her delicate white arms, she danced lightly about the room until all were captivated by her grace. The young Prince was enchanted so she danced for him again, even though every step was agony.



From that day on she spent all her time in the Prince's company. They rode on horse back through the green woods and climbed steep mountains until her poor feet bled. But still she smiled and her good, sweet nature charmed all who met her. Every night she would descend the marble steps and soothe her burning feet in the cool sea water, and then she would think of her beloved family down below. One night she could hear her sisters sadly

singing and called to them. They were overjoyed to find her and told her of their father's misery at losing his youngest daughter. But the little Mermaid could only weep in reply and, with a final wave, they sank once more below the surface of the sea.

The little Mermaiden became more and more dear to the Prince as the days went by, but he looked upon her as a sweet, gentle child and the thought of making her his wife never entered his head.

The little Mermaid longed for him to prove his affection.

"Do you not love me above all the others?" her eyes seemed to ask, as he held her fondly in his arms.

"You are dearer to me than any other, for no-one is as honest and true as you!" the Prince would say. "You remind me of a girl whom I saw just once and may never see again. She tended me as I lay lifeless on the sand and I can never forget her."

"Alas! He does not know that it was I who saved his life," sighed the little Mermaid.

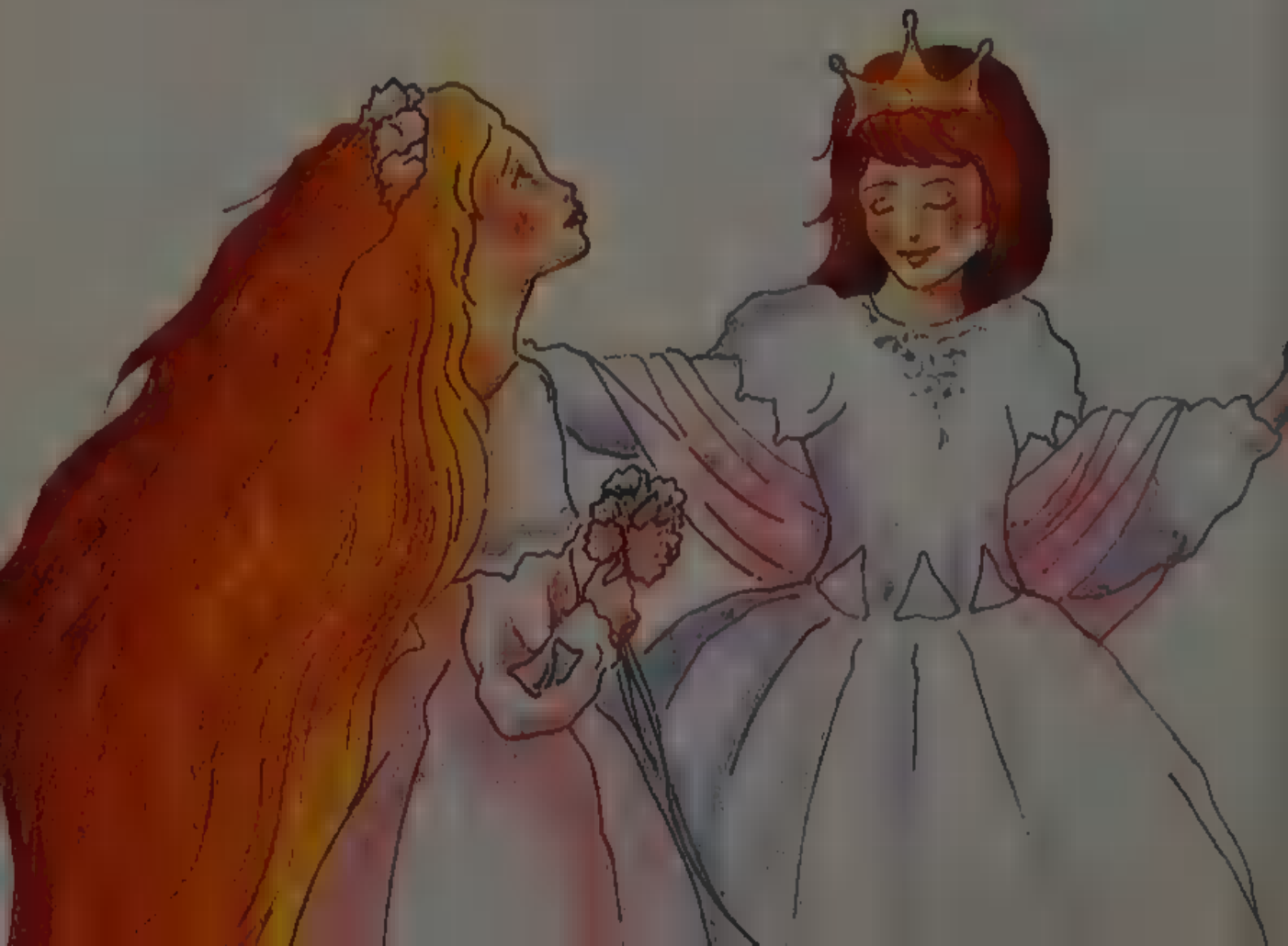
Time passed and the King and Queen decided that the Prince should marry the

daughter of a neighbouring king. The little Mermaid was frantic with fear. "Now my Prince will never marry me and I will never win my soul!" she thought. But the Prince was not happy with the plan either.

"I must obey my parents and visit this Princess," he told her, as he tenderly stroked her hair, "but they cannot force me to marry her. And it is quite impossible for me to love her for she will not be like the beautiful girl who saved me from the sea."

The next day they set out on board the Royal Ship. Across the sea they sailed and as the ship approached the King's splendid capital, loud trumpets heralded their arrival.

Bright banners welcomed them ashore. There waited the Royal Party and the little Mermaid's heart missed a beat, for the Princess was beautiful and she knew the Prince would be sure to fall in love.



Sure enough, the Prince clapped his hands with joy.

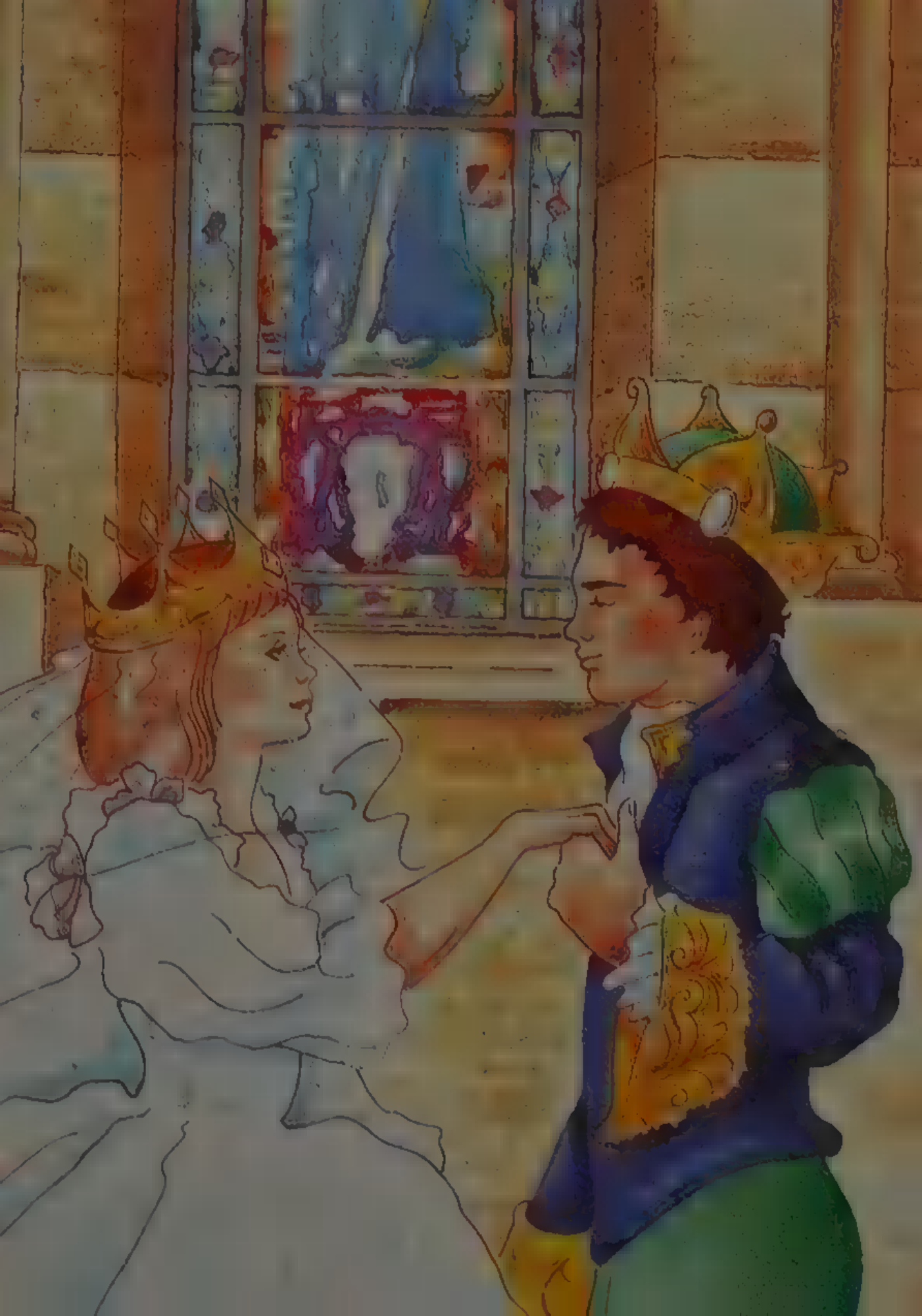
"It is her!" he cried. "She is the one who saved my life when I lay like a corpse on the seashore." The Princess was indeed the very same girl who had found him lying close to death — but she was not the one who had saved him. The Prince turned to the little Mermaid.

"Be thankful for me, little one. You love me more than any other and must surely wish me to find true happiness?"

But the little Mermaid kissed his hand in silent sorrow and it seemed to her as if her heart was breaking already. Now she knew that she had lost both this world and the next. She would never live forever.

The Princess was equally well pleased with the Prince and so the wedding was agreed upon. As the church bells rang merrily, the bride and bridegroom held hands while the priest read the words which united them.

The little Mermaid stood behind the Princess and held the train of her bridal dress. But she heard not the stirring music, nor saw the solemn majesty of the holy ceremony.



That evening, as soon as it was dark, coloured lamps were hung out on the Royal Ship and the celebrations began. The little Mermaid was reminded of the sight that had met her eyes the first time she rose to the surface of the sea and her heart trembled within her. The music began and for the last time she danced for her Prince. Never had she moved with more enchanting grace and never had she appeared more beautiful. Her little feet suffered greatly

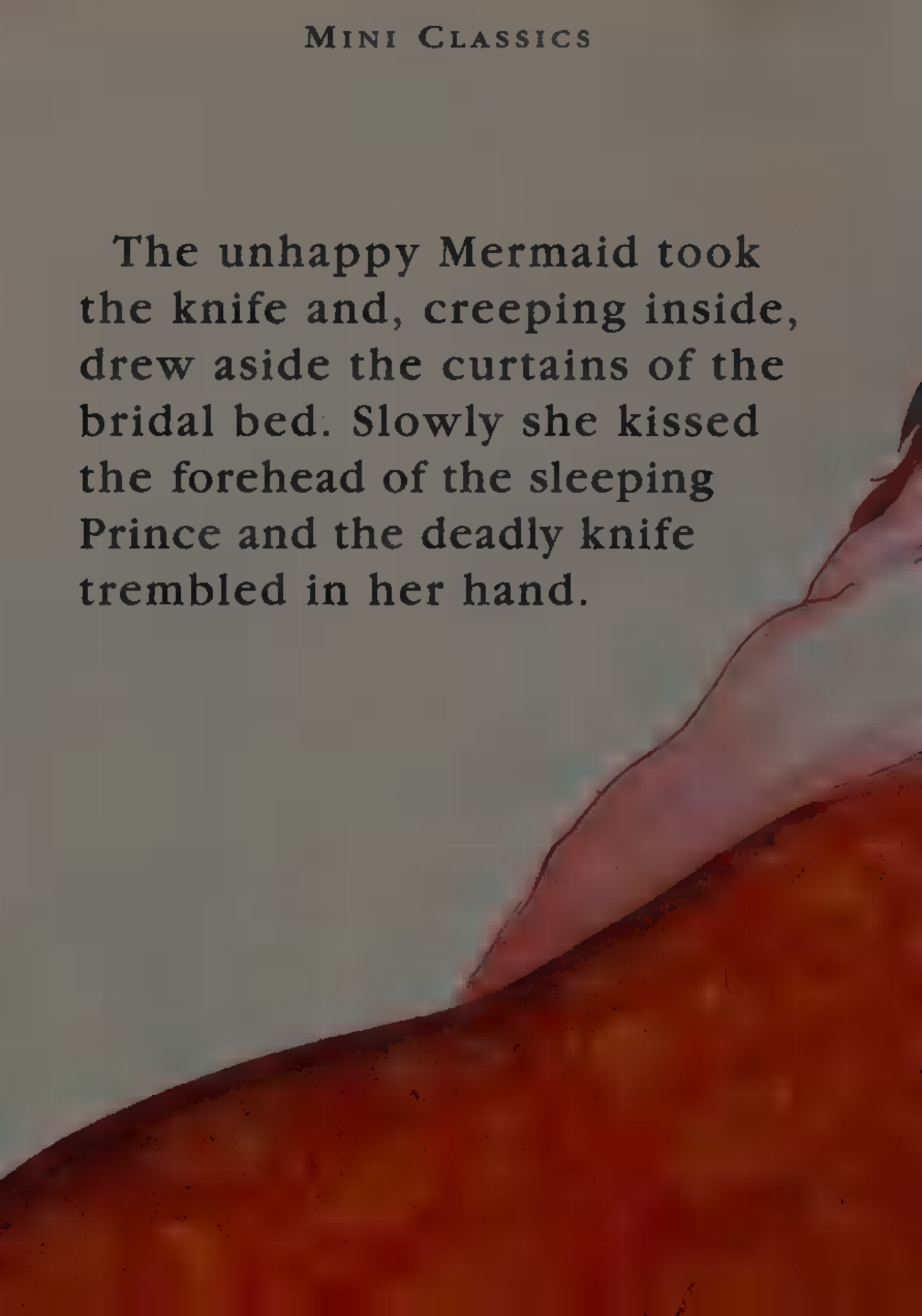
but she no longer felt the pain. She had forsaken her home and family. She had given away her beautiful voice. She had exhanged her silver tail for agonising footsteps— all for her Prince, and all without his knowing that she was the one who had saved him from the storm.

The party ended and the ship was now still. All alone, the little Mermaid leaned on the rail and looked eastwards, waiting for the dawn.

All at once she saw her sisters rise from the sea. Their faces were deadly pale and their beautiful long hair no longer fluttered about their shoulders for it had all been cut off.

"We have given it to the sea-witch," they called. "She demanded it when we begged her to help you. She has given us a knife and with this you can be saved!. Before the sun rises, you must plunge it into the Prince's heart and when his warm blood trickles down upon your feet, they will be changed back into a fish's tail. Once more you will be a mermaid — but hurry! The sun is rising in the eastern sky and soon it will be too late!

The unhappy Mermaid took the knife and, creeping inside, drew aside the curtains of the bridal bed. Slowly she kissed the forehead of the sleeping Prince and the deadly knife trembled in her hand.

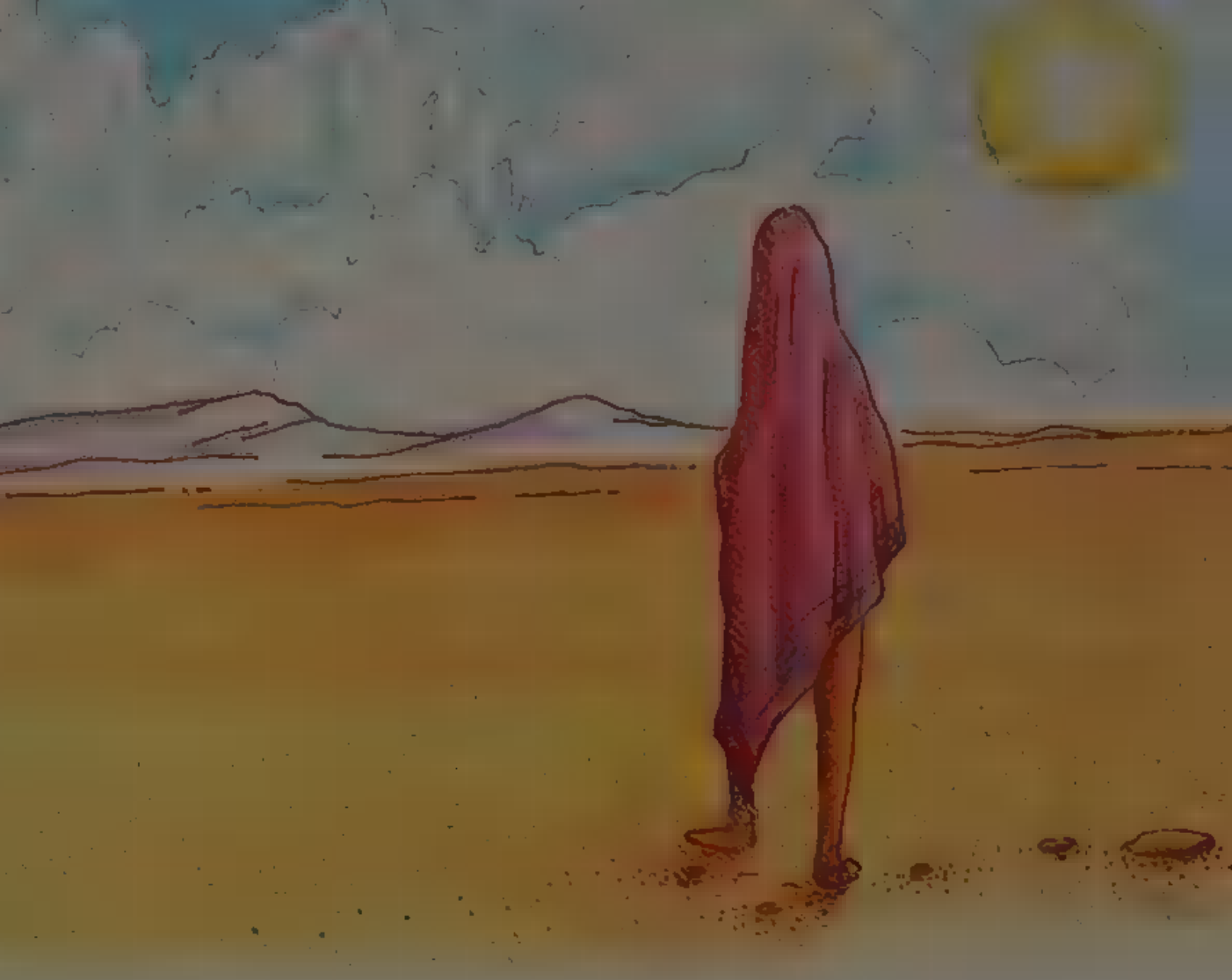


Suddenly she turned and flung it far out to sea. The waves rose like blazing flames around it and the water seemed tinged with blood. As the sun slowly crept over the horizon, she took one last look at her beloved Prince and jumped from the ship into the sea. As she sank under the waves she felt her body slowly but surely dissolving into foam.

The sun rose from his watery bed and his beams fell so softly and warmly upon her that our

little Mermaid was scarcely aware she was dying. Over her head hovered a thousand beautiful spirits singing with sweet voices. Then the little Mermaid saw that she had a body as transparent as theirs and she felt herself raised up from the foam.

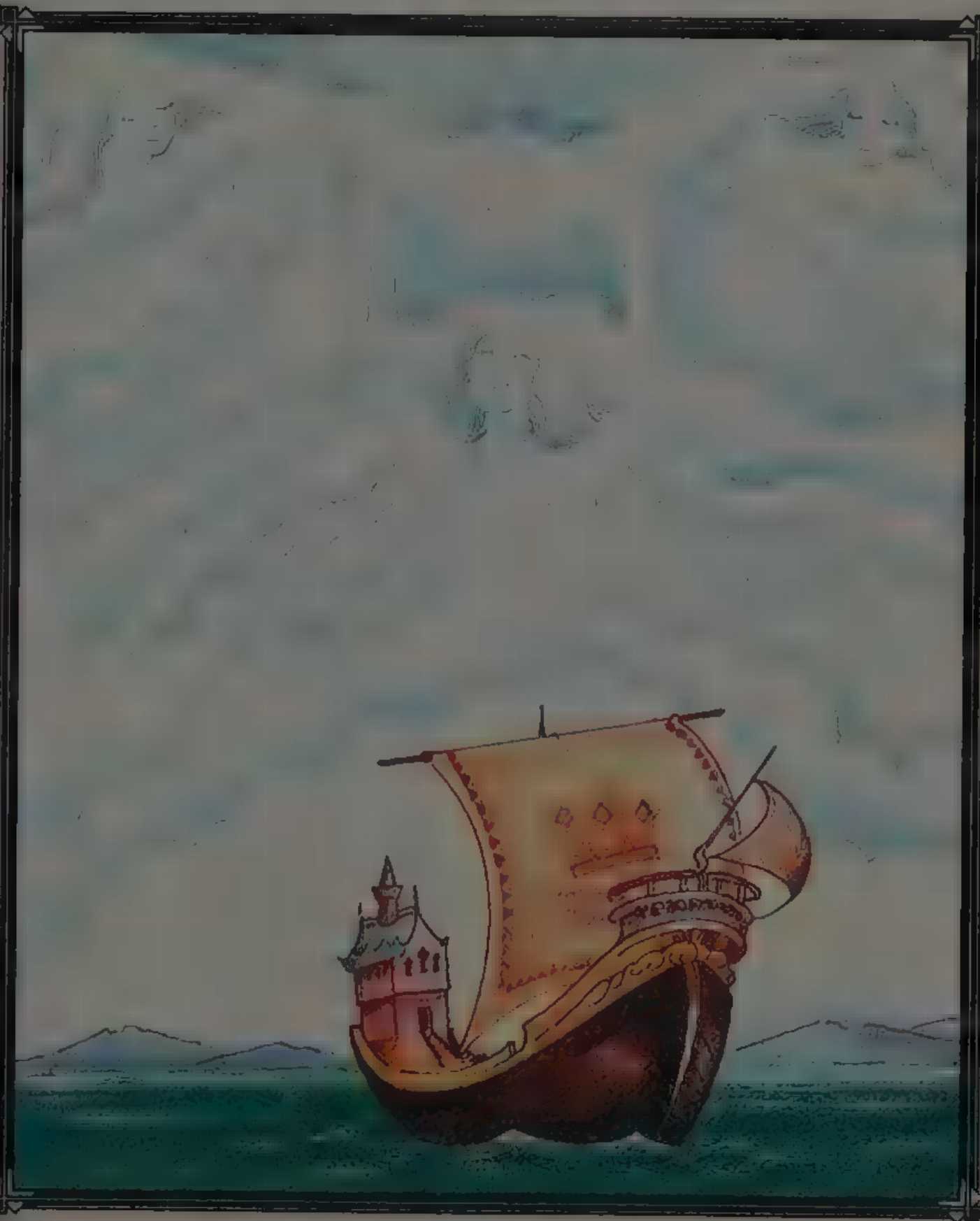
"We are the daughters of the air," they softly said, as they floated around her. "We do not need the love of man to live forever. We win everlasting life by doing good and kind deeds.



We fly to hot countries where children breathe bad air and waste away. We bring our cooling breath and revive them. We carry sweet flower fragrances wherever we go

and spread health and delight over all the earth. By doing good in this manner for three hundred years, we win eternal life. Now you are one of us and may also win your soul."

The little Mermaid stretched out her gossamer arms to the sun and tears filled her eyes. Down below she could see the Prince with his pretty bride and knew that they would miss her. Suddenly the Mermaid realised she was no longer unhappy. Unseen, she smiled upon them and wished them great happiness, then joining the children of the air, she lifted her face and soared high above the rosy clouds.



Hans Christian Andersen

Hans Christian Andersen was born in Odense, Denmark, on April 2nd, 1805. His family was very poor and throughout his life he suffered much unhappiness. Even after he had found success as a writer, Hans Christian Andersen felt something of an outsider, [redacted] aspect which often emerged in his stories and can be seen clearly here in the character of the little Mermaid.

His fairy stories, famous throughout the world, include *The Snow Queen*, *The Ugly Duckling* and *The Emperor's New Clothes*, and are amongst the most frequently translated works of literature.

·PARRAGON·

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